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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that more cooperation is needed between scholars and librarians. Toward this end, we need first to produce more literary scholars who are truly skilled in librarianship, and second, we need to produce more librarians who are true scholars. Some library-oriented professors give copies of their lesson plans to the reference librarian, bring their favorite reference books to the first week of classes, make assignments that require their students to use them, and help their students focus their research on a manageable area. Scholar-librarians, on the other hand, use the professor's lesson plan as a means of teaching themselves, build up a huge central file of questions and answers, prepare short annotated lists of titles, and provide the opportunity for "discipline tutorials" for students. The document concludes by emphasizing that librarianship is a teaching service. (LL)

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IVORY TOWERS AND NOTE CARDS

Prepared for MLA Seminar No.651, December 1976

on

Literary Scholars, Librarians,
and the Teaching of Literary Research MethodsMargaret C. Patterson
University of Florida, 1970-75

Let us begin with the understanding that the tension between scholars who use books and librarians who are in charge of them has been around for a long time. During the Middle Ages those monks who chained Bibles to lecterns to be certain they would be there for matins must surely have chafed at the necessity for doing so. Even in Ninevah clay tablets must occasionally have been misshelved, and scrolls in Rome were probably tucked into togas--all to the irritation of those early librarians whose duty it was to produce, probably on the very day of their disappearance, those same missing items for their bishops and monarchs.

So we must not--at present, at least--feel guilty about being able to cite only isolated instances where today's teacher, librarian, and school curriculum cooperate, willingly and intelligently, to produce students who feel comfortable with reference books and research projects. Inspired is the creator of that wonderfully pregnant phrase, "territorial imperative," and there is much truth in it, but even that condition stems from a more basic and comically primitive problem--librarians are NEAT; scholars are MESSY. And considering the educational philosophy which produces these same librarians and literary scholars, such a problem is inevitable.

Under the present system, librarians are trained to acquire, arrange, and protect their holdings so that they

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can be used with ease and efficiency; researchers, on the other hand, MUST dig into every crevice, like a bargain hunter in Filene's basement, in order to glean every scrap of information for his next book, which will in turn go on those library shelves to be protected by the librarian who . . . , etc. The librarian, with dozens of research scholars in several different disciplines clamoring for her aid, is obliged to distribute her time and effort carefully, but she can generally turn off her labors at 5:00 p.m. The scholar is like one possessed--he should have stayed in his office to grade those papers, the report for the committee is due, his lesson plan had to be cut down from a full semester to a quarter term, now that librarian wants to take over some of his precious class hours to teach his students about Dewey and dictionaries--and yet he MUST complete this research project because he MUST publish.

I say we should not feel guilty at present about this situation--but we should feel guilty if we allow it to persist. The solution is simple, but the mechanics of bringing it to fruition are indeed complex. We need two things:

First, we need to produce more literary scholars who are truly skilled in librarianship. Until the teachers themselves understand the research possibilities offered, for instance, by the numerous existing indexing services, how can they be expected to pass on knowledge of these devices to their students? Or, even more important than simple awareness of devices is the library-oriented teacher's attitude that reference books can be useful and that research ought to be a part of the student's education.

Second, we need to produce more librarians who are truly scholars.

We have regrettably few professionals today who can be classified in either of these two categories, but there is no justifiable or defensible reason why we should not have them--easily--in the future.

Leadership in this movement must, I think, come from the librarian. I would like to see all librarians respected by administrators and faculty for the intelligent, willing, and conscientious people that most of them are, and we can do this only by admitting that we can no longer expect them to have All Knowledge as Their Province, like Bacon. I would like to see librarians specialize, specialize, specialize (professors do!), first by getting a master's degree in their chosen field, then by going to a library school that would allow them to explore, in depth, every aspect of research in that field--all reference books, all rare books, all international library holdings, all scholars, and all approaches. This will require changes in library school curriculums and administrators, to be sure. Then these librarian-scholars can be placed in library situations where they can use their training and knowledge, where they can actively assist researchers from the start of their project to the triumphant end, advising, suggesting, and contributing a valuable overview of what research ought to accomplish. These scholar-librarians ought to be on university curriculum committees, and they ought both to continue their studies and publish, publish, publish. Professors do. As long as librarians are limited, as they are now, all too often, to gesturing that the Americana is in the third aisle to the right, they are not going to be granted the total respect that will prompt university professors to turn their classes over to them for bibliographical instruction.

And the teachers? Frankly, the art of using books should begin in the home, with Dr. Seuss's dictionary, at age 3.

Then, just as there is a planned curriculum from addition and subtraction to geometry, algebra, trigonometry, calculus, and all the sciences, so should there be an organized course of research methods throughout all the elementary and secondary grades, so that when the child is finally at the college level he will already be thoroughly familiar with the concept of "index" and the methodical procedure of compiling a secondary bibliography. How unrealistic it is to expect anyone to digest--with grace--the entire scope of literary research methods in one taped lecture of the library or in one brief session with a librarian. If we can produce college students who already know the advantages of consulting specialized biographical dictionaries and the invaluable short cuts offered by abstracting services, can we not expect that, when they in turn finally become college professors, they will encourage their students to be efficient researchers, also? --And even more important, they will expect the librarian to be there, helping their students improve their research technique.

So long as there is tension between librarians and teachers, no such condition can exist. We have a Common Cause--the education of our future scholars and, as F. W. Bateson puts it, "the American soul" (Journal of General Education, 13, i (April 1961), 17). This is no trifling matter we are considering. If we discourage literary research, we are discouraging communication with both the past and the present. What then of the future?

A few library-oriented professors have managed to survive the flamboyant days of "Film" and "Creative Writing." They are not always the most popular on the campus but they are among the most respected, and they certainly are well-published. It looks now as if they might not merely endure, they might prevail. And they all, curiously, have similar ways of communicating their research needs and requirements.

Let us consider their methods:

1. Some of them give copies of their lesson plans to the reference librarian. There, O Scholar-librarian, is your opportunity. Study it, enlarge it, have suggestions and questions ready, tell him that you have seen it, that you want to help his students fulfill his ^{research} requirements using the best possible research methods, and then ask if you can talk with him about the plan and how he would like you to handle it. "Only connect," E. M. Forster said.
2. The best of them bring their favorite reference books to the first week of classes, and they continue to refer to them by name or editor throughout the term. Once again, if the librarian has herself become friends with the professor, her influence will be evident in the selection and she will, however subtly, be helping both teacher and student extend their horizons.
3. Most of them make assignments that require students to use these tools several times during the term. Reinforced learning does work. Throughout this process, the scholar-librarian learns, too. She is finding out why the professor prefers some titles over others, and because she has had an opportunity to study the lesson plan before the students come to her in the library, she is answering their questions from an informed point of view.
4. Only a few of them help their students focus their research on a manageable area, and here the librarian can be of real service. She can guide them to intelligent analysis of research possibilities and then lead them to books that will help them narrow their scope.

5. All of these research-oriented professors accept the limitations of their students' intelligence and imagination. They are aware that Truth is elusive and that young people grow by testing their ideas against those that have gone before. In other words, they espouse research as a way of learning, and they feel that university students deserve to be taught good research methods.

The scholar-librarian, like the literary scholar, knows her subject well and she disperses it with wisdom:

1. She uses the professor's lesson plan as a means of teaching herself, and she agrees with him that research, as a way of learning, is a skill that all universities ought to require of their students.
2. She builds up a huge central file of questions and answers, exchanges them with other libraries and librarians, and at every opportunity prepares short, manageable, annotated lists of titles (learning as she annotates) that will help her students and professor-friends. This is good P-R policy and probably accomplishes more than we realize.
3. She provides the opportunity for "discipline tutorials." At Harvard, where there is no required course in bibliography and never will be, the librarians schedule in their weekly logs 10-15 hours for individual instruction. Because some Harvard professors do encourage their students to take advantage of these tutorials, the more dedicated sign up for an hour, indicating their subject, and then, after the librarian has done her own research on the problem, they sit down together with all available materials and discuss the research methods.

4. These scholar-librarians recognize the regrettable fact that in most cases it will be they who will, for the present at least, have to take the first step toward establishing a good relationship with the professor--and they do so, but always with the support of the administration. At Wellesley College, where they have prepared elaborate written objectives to show that use of the library is valid, they first present their tutorial plan to the Dean of the department and then they ask the professors to suggest that their students attend. They are delighted with a 10% response. They affirm what we already know--that most students do not come for help unless they are urged, or required, to do so, and that most professors do not want to surrender any of their class time, and precious little, if any, of their study time to bibliographic instruction.

One more breed of researcher exists: the literature professor who has also been trained in librarianship. As a desirable counterpart of the aforementioned scholar-librarian, she has obvious advantages. She is in a good position to cope with curriculum committees that question, sometimes annually, the wisdom of requiring its English graduate students to take courses in bibliography and methods of research, as does the University of Florida. She has ready answers, with some status, for articulate colleagues who begrudge the time spent by their "creative" students with bibliographies and indexes, first editions and manuscripts. She is always allowed to teach the methods course, to the immense relief of everyone else in the department, who didn't want to teach it themselves, anyway. As a part of her lesson plan and office hours, she can spend long hours in the library guiding her own students into efficient research

procedures, students who, as it turns out, do go on to become scholar-librarians and library-oriented professors. And while she understands the value of asking specialists--the Rare Book librarian, the computer expert, the textual editor--to come occasionally to her classes, as a trained teacher, she also recognizes the serious limitation of this "team teaching" idea. She knows that teaching is an art, that an aura of excitement and anticipation and success has to be created in a classroom just as in a theatre, that this charisma, or mystique, can be created only by sheer dynamic, inspiring, provocative teaching. It's hard to do, and it's exhausting. Let one dull dullard of an inter-library loan lad take over that class for just one hour, and the mystique is shattered.

This may be the most crucial, and painful, point of all--that some librarians do not realize the extent to which librarianship is a teaching service. Whether you like it or not, we literature students look upon you librarians as teachers, and when we want to learn, when we need to learn, it hurts to be put down. The most successful teacher I know has said, "It is not so much what you teach, it is the way you teach it." We are, after all, only trying to mold a young mind that, in the half century of its adult life, will be able and willing to continue educating itself. Let us go on about our business together.